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AUTHOR Baskin, Barbara; Harris, Karen
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ABSTRACT

When children are visually handicapped to the point that they cannot read, some other form of information carrier, such as braille books, sound recordings, models, and realia, must be used. For deaf children, one must provide a variety of visual information on transparencies and captioned filmstrips. Retarded children need special materials which are in logical sequence, have repetitive characteristics, and have no distracting elements. Multimedia materials may provide helpful reinforcement. Disturbed children may be helped by individualized instruction. The librarian can be a tremendous help to these children, and also to physically handicapped children, by choosing appropriate equipment and materials and by leading handicapped children toward materials that will help them to understand themselves, their limitations, and their potential. The author suggests some book titles, both for handicapped children and for adults concerned with them. (LS).

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THE EXCEPTIONAL CHILD IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY:

RESPONSE AND STRATEGY

Barbara Baskin
Assistant Professor of Education
State University of New York at Stony Brook

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Karen Harris
Assistant Professor of Library Science
University of New Orleans

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The handicapping conditions sustained by some children render them unable to learn through the usual channels. If a visual impairment is sufficiently profound, then sight obviously cannot be relied on for informational input. However, in instances of milder impairments, the use of vision may still be severely restricted and primary dependence must be transferred to auditory and tactile channels. For the librarian, this means that the selection of information carriers must be reformulated and rechanneled to other substitute functioning modalities. Materials may need to be available in brailled or recorded format as well as in printed modes. Models and realia are important means to transmit data.

The librarian needs to determine which is the best method of presenting various kinds of information -- best in terms of the information structure and best in terms of the childs' needs. Braille is the most cumbersome and expensive in terms of both production and storage costs. However, braille is still the medium of choice in certain subjects such as math, chemistry, etc. where frequent immediate review and the capability of rechecking one's perception readily are important. There are a multitude of sources for brailled trade books and texts. In addition, there are some agencies which will braille materials on request.

For certain purposes, a recorded format is preferable. Literary experiences and narratives are available on discs and tapes which have been recorded by the theatres' top artists. The Library of Congress is the major, but not exclusive, distributor of talking books, available now to anyone who is blind or sustains sufficient physical impairment to make the reading of bocks in printed format arduous. Discs are becoming lighter in weight and fidelity at lowered speed

has improved to such an extent that now talking books are much easier to handle. Talking book machines are available free to all users with full repair and replacement service.

Variable speed tape recorders have been produced which enable the blind reader to skim and review at rapid speeds or to ponder and savor those materials which require concentration and study. This technological advance has been an enormous boon since the blind child now can more easily simulate the varied academic behavior of the sighted child. This type of presentation is highly subservient to his needs and thus is a vast improvement over his being forced to adapt to the demands of a monospeed recorder. Both braille reading and listening to recordings are slower modes of learning than reading standard print format. Condensed speech, a recently available auditory development, allows some speed-up of the learning process. This is important in high school years especially if the disabled student is college bound and the cost/benefit ratio of time spent on studies is of critical importance.

Prisms, magnifiers, and such projection devices as closed circuit television screens enable the severely visually limited student to maximize what vision he has. There is now a costly prototype model of a camera device which photographs standard print and translates the image into raised letters so that any printed data is instantly available in an intelligible format to blind students. Further breakthroughs in reducing the impact of sightlessness can be expected.

For the physically disabled, such considerations as ease of use, automatic features, and ruggedness may be the deciding factors in the purchase of media equipment. Self-threading or cartridge capacity projection may seem a luxury for the fully functioning student, whereas these capabilities are vital features in equipment for the physically impaired. If poor upper body development or

disability of the upper extremeties is a factor, paperbound books may be less fatiguing because of the reduced weight than hardcover books.

For the deaf child, the preferred visual medium for information display is frequently the transparency. The nature of the functioning of the overhead projector permits utilization in a fully lighted room allowing the speaker to face his listeners so that the projected image can be viewed as lips or hand signs are read simultaneously. Any alternate projection device which places the speaker in diminished light or in back of the viewer restricts the deaf childs' participation. When filmstrips are used, captioned ones transmit more information to these children than sound ones do. If captioned filmstrips are used with recorded sound then information is available to both blind and deaf students and reinforcement is also achieved for all others.

For the retarded child it is necessary to select materials which develop concepts in logical sequence, contain no extraneous or distracting components, and have repetitive characteristics. Multi-media presentations are often effective since reinforcement through multiple channel input is desirable. Tapes which narrate a filmstrip, the content of which is repeated in book format may provide the additional supplement the limited child needs. The reinforcement potential of tapes and film loops is high; when the latter is used in projectors with freeze frame capacity, opportunities for reduced pacing as well as for careful examination is extended.

The disturbed child may need more individualized instruction than his peers. His ability to function well in a group, cope with time-pressures and survive in a competitive situation is minimal. Media offers a multitude of possibilities for responding to his instructional needs.

In many libraries, even those known as materials or resource centers, books are still the backbone of the collection. The exceptional child needs

and can use books too, therefore, the collection should include selections to accommodate his special needs. The visually impaired child may need brailled or large print books. Now there are twin vision books available which have both standard print and braille within the same book so that reading experiences can be shared by sighted and blind children. This means that this format contains great possibilities for socialization needed by both the disabled and non-disabled child. Large print books are presently published in traditional book sizes instead of the outsized format so the child is not embarrassed by having to broadcast his need for adapted materials. The perceptually handicapped young child needs picture books with good figure/ground discrimination and well outlined figures. The deaf child and the mentally retarded child both need high interest/low ability books: their interests closely parallel those of their age peers although vocabulary, sight reading and comprehension skills may be much reduced. For the deaf child this occurs because deafness generally causes delayed language development which results in a reading performance considerably below grade level. However, his normal intellect requires material in keeping with his chronological age.

For disturbed children under psychiatric treatment, books may be a part of their therapeutic program. Problems under consideration may often be examined in a fictional setting which would be too painful to deal with directly in real life situations. For the maladjusted child, the examination of events involving personal, familial or social pressure in a literary format can be used to explore a variety of socially acceptable means of coping with problems.

Just as the library supports, complements, extends, vivifies and individualizes the curriculum for the average child, so it must perform these functions for the special child. The need, however, is even more crucial. Usually circumstances have created a gap of some size between the functioning

academic performance of the exceptional child and those of his age peers. This discrepancy is usually perceived by the child, and he is increasingly distressed by it as he matures and observes differential rates of achievement. This awareness depresses his interest in learning and the prospect of using library materials appears formidable, non-rewarding or futile.

It is in this context that the librarian's role can be of prime importance since she can address herself to this distressing academic picture in a non-threatening, even helpful role. By manipulating physical and personnel resources, by drawing on materials especially developed for children whose impairments have diminished their reading ability, by calling on specialized local, state and national sources, she can construct a media-augmented program, an appropriate print program or an array of specialists who can supplement her skills. Parent groups, service organizations and local universities with special education programs often have resources which might be utilized.

By avoiding experiences which stress evaluation, the child can relax his guard and be more receptive to informational input. Particularly in a mainstreaming situation, it may be that the greatest accomplishment of the librarian is to make academic involvement feasible, efficient, easy and pleasureable.

The library performs an especially critical academic service for the special child. Because of the experiential construction in many of these children's lives and because they have been denied the intellectual benefits which direct participation in the cultural experience usually generates, they have many and varied gaps in their bank of knowledge. The library has the potential to partially compensate for this intellectual vacuum.

The materials in a mainstreamed classroom are unlikely to be fully responsive to the needs of the special child. The format may be inappropriate, the intellectual demands may be too stringent or lax, or the style may be

unstimulating or age-inappropriate. Only the library, with its multiplicity of resources can provide the variety necessary to deal with a wide range of curricular subjects adaptable to the child's special requirements for learning.

The library, unlike other school settings, can insure that the special child is an "excellent" student. Moreover, this success might provide the child with the psychological sustenance to balance those areas in his life which are negativistic or destructive. He can also share a satisfying feeling of belonging and may gain the social and psychological skills which derive from group interaction wherein he isn't relegated to the sidelines. The librarian should not overlook the bibliotherapeutic impact of literature capable of providing emotional support and insight into the university of human experience. Prudence Sutherland, a young woman with cerebral palsy, in a widely reprinted article states:

> By the time I was well into high school I felt my difference to a tremendous degree, and furthermore, I felt that I was radically different, not only physically but mentally. My parents and teachers recommended authors and books, and what I read had an added bearing on my feeling that I was mentally different from most other people. The young, severely handicapped person desperately searches for a normal person who feels the way he does about life. His search is so intensive that he is most apt to identify himself, though the image is vastly distorted, with whomever he is reading about.[1]

> After a few years I felt a great desire to assert my independence, but it was difficult because of my physical limitations. I began to choose my own books instead of reading only those which were recommended to me. One of the most memorable of these was John Updike's The Centaur. Updike writes very perceptively and honestly of the whole experience of being human - physiological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. What a tremendous comfort and relevation he was! The identity and unity that I suddenly felt with the human race after so long a period of isolation has to be experienced to be appreciated.[2]

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1. Prudence A. Sutherland, "On the Need of the Severely Handicapped to Feel That They Are Human," Top of the News, XXVI (April, 1969), 265.

2. Ibid., 266

Whatever else may be impaired, handicapped children often have developed highly refined skills in evaluating the feelings of people they come in contact with. They know the difference between welcome and tolerance, between concern and obligation, between warmth and phoniness. If the librarian develops the ability to see behind the myriad facades the exceptional child uses to fend off the pressures of a world he has not yet learned to deal with directly, she will realize that the behavior she observes is not so much directed at her as simply toward her because of her proximity or what she symbolically personifies. This will take time, patience, a high level of tolerance, and a great deal of tenacity. The rewards which can be anticipated are enormous since she might reasonably assume that active intervention could radically change the quality and direction of a childs' life.

The parents of the exceptional child are no more likely than the parents of average children to be able to assist in the adjustment problems that are the inevitable concomitant of growing up in contemporary society. Such problems as sibling rivalry, death or separation, realistic acceptance of self and the confusions of puberty are the heritage of all children. The exceptional child has, in addition, the problem of acceptance of his diminished function, lessened independence, vocational uncertainties and restricted opportunities for social growth.

The natural sibling rivalry is exacerbated in a family which includes a special child. Treatment is inherently unequal since the needs of the special child must be accommodated and the non-afflicted will enjoy opportunities and experiences unavailable to his sibling. The jealousies which result will find their counterpart in literature through which each child can come to understand that his emotions, far from being shameful and separating him from the mainstream are normal and common to all humanity. This frees him from the self-

generated press to perceive himself as alone or fundamentally different.

Literature can present a variety of responses to a situation. The characters in a story react in compassionate, sensitive, selfish or ignoble ways and the child reader can explore the possibilities and note reactions through eyes other than his own. For a child whose direct experiences are limited, this is especially critical.

The disabled can see themselves reflected in books and may develop a more realistic understanding of their limitations and potential. But literature is often misused with the handicapped. Often characters in stories are proposed as examples for the young reader to emulate. The child is exho ted to model himself after these high achievers. If he does so, he is consequently burdened with poor self esteem since he can hardly hope to equal their accomplishments. The iibrarian must be cautious about superimposing her own values upon the disabled child. His own interests, dreams and hopes must control his literary choices.

The acceptance by the librarian of the special child will set the tone of behavior for students in her library. Some children find the uncontrolled movements of the palsied child disturbing or the imperfect attempts of the deaf child at communication unintelligible. They are frightened or uncomfortable or put off. Possibly, some of them mimic the superstitious misunderstandings or avoidance behavior of the larger society. They are amused or contemptuous of the slowness of the retarded child and subject him to ridicule. The librarian cannot tolerate this. Her role is to serve as a model of appropriate, welcoming behavior and to expand the non-handicapped child's understanding and empathy for his school mates.

Daniel Fader reports in The Naked Children of his efforts to include Johnathon, a rejected spastic child into the nursery school activities:

> I came to see clearly what I did believe: that four-year-old children must not be spared the human requirement of accepting a Johnathon ... Certainly not all of the children accepted him, perhaps not one of them accepted him fully. But that does not matter either. What does matter is that a community of nineteen normal children found a place for one abnormal child because it was inconceivable that less should be demanded of them.[3]

If such a demand can be made of nursery school children and they are able to live up to it, then at least this much must be demanded of school age people.

How else can the librarian assist in this acceptance in addition to her own example? Library programming must be so organized that the special child can readily participate. Materials and procedures must be set up so that it is clear to all that normal library functioning includes everybody. This is not a proposition open to question; it is on a priori assumption.

Additionally, the librarian must seek out the literature written for children which explains and illuminates the ramifications of disabilities. There are a surprising number of books which portray characters who are retarded, disturbed, sensorily impaired or physically handicapped. In the mounds of dross published, there are some works of superior quality. It is important that rather stringent selection standards be used though. Some of the books in the field could compete actively for the worst-book-of-the-year award. Some are maudlin, dripping with pity and full of tears for the poor little afflicted character. The authors' tearful self-indulgence is intolerable and certainly generates precisely the wrong responses. Other books are full of misinformation and outrageously improbable events. One recent book about a mentally retarded child has this character saving a life, singlehandedly licking the school bully in front of two of the bully's friends who are properly intimidated and catching the child who vandalized his school complete with incriminating evidence.[4] A polio victim in another book who

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4.L. Dean Carper. A Cry In the Wind. (Independence, Missouri: Herald, 1973.

had been unable to walk, suddenly grabs his crutches and hightails it down the hall when his baseball hero appears on the scene.[5] In yet another fantasy, a ten-year-old character with a severely deformed leg completes a ten mile walk to raise money for charity.[6] Some afflicted characters are such models of patience, perception, kindness and compassion that instant beatification would seem an insufficient response. The truth is, of course, that such children are more apt to suffer pain, frustration, isolation and humiliation, and contrary to popular mythology, the experience is not generally enobling.

Some books are full of inaccurate information. Medical and prosthetic devices are mislabeled, disorders are improperly described, terminology is careless and behavior and prognosis are inconsistent with the most rudimentary knowledge of the disabling condition.

Other books are just plain bad literature. Plots are contrived, characters unbelievable, style ungraced by either a firm command of grammatical construction or felicitious phrasing. An inferior book will not be improved by the introduction of a handicapped character.

There are, however, some truly sensitive, perceptive and beautifully written books. The characterization of Charlie, a profoundly retarded child in Summer of the Swans[7] is excellent. He responds to the world in ways a child so afflicted could be expected to respond. His family reacts to him with a combination of frustration, compassion, annoyance and love -- a believable combination and a relief from the unidimensional behaviors displayed in lesser books.

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5. Dawn C. Thomas. Pablito's New Feet. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Lippincott, 1973).
6. Prudence Andrew. Mister O'Brien. (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1972).
7. Betsy Byars. Summer of the Swans. (New York: Viking, 1970).

The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear[8] tells of the pressures on a young boy which make him retreat from reality into a less threatening psychotic state. The author transports the reader inside this child's world and one experiences with him the intolerable burdens of his existence. This is a sensitive and moving story of a difficult subject to cope with in juvenile fiction.

Judy Blume's Deenie[9], the story of a teen-age child stricken with scoliosis, a condition which if untreated causes spinal deformation, is a superior book. At one point in the story Deenie recalls: "This afternoon, on my way to French, I didn't look away when I passed the Special Class. I saw Gena Courtney working at the blackboard. I wonder if she thinks of herself as a handicapped person or just a regular girl, like me."[10] This kind of perception makes the book useful to the librarian concerned with the integration of the special child. It can help the unafflicted see through the imperfect body to the much more significant humanity underneath.

A school librarian, perhaps more than most faculty members, is apt to wonder what impact her presence has had on the crowds which pass through the library. When the librarian has enthusiastically and appropriately prescribed and tailored a program for the exceptional child, that influence has often been of pivotal importance for those children. She has, through her own efforts and by exploiting the powerful literary tools of her trade, worked towards the goal of full participation and of a more democratic and more humanistic world view by disabled and non-disabled alike.

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8. Kin Platt. The Boy Who Could Make Himself Disappear. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Chilton, 1968).
9. Judy Blume. Deenie. (Scarsdale, New York: Bradbury Press, 1973).
10. Ibid., 155.

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